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Wabanaki Resistance and Healing: An Exploration of the Contemporary Role of an Eighteenth Century Bounty Proclamation in an Indigenous Decolonization Process

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the contemporary role of an eighteenth century bounty proclamation issued on the Penobscot Indians of Maine. We focus specifically on how the changing cultural context of the 1755 Spencer Phips Bounty Proclamation has transformed the document from serving as a tool for sanctioned violence to a tool of decolonization for the Indigenous peoples of Maine. We explore examples of the ways indigenous and non-indigenous people use the Phips Proclamation to illustrate past violence directed against Indigenous peoples. This exploration is enhanced with an analysis of the re-introduction of the Phips Proclamation using concepts of decolonization theory.

Keywords

Wabanaki, Bounty Proclamations, Decolonization

Author Biography

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This paper focuses on how the changing cultural context of one document—the 1755 Spencer Phips Bounty Proclamation—has transformed the document from serving as a tool for sanctioned violence to a tool of decolonization for the Indigenous peoples of Maine. The Wabanaki tribes of Maine include the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, the Passamaquoddy Tribe, the Aroostook Band of Micmac Indians and the Penobscot Indian Nation. Since European contact, the history of the Wabanaki people has often been violent. Land dispossession, war, disease, oppression, and genocide are all part of the Wabanaki story. Evidence of both physical and structural violence directed against Wabanaki people exists in document form. Treaties, petitions, death certificates, and maps are examples of documents that illustrate relationships between groups and individuals. They can be useful in understanding social dynamics and history. At another level, people often engage with documents much the same way they engage with other forms of material culture. Documents can be displayed, discarded, curated, sold or traded and even transformed through human influences. It is the content of the document combined with its cultural context that dictates the role of a document in human society.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Wabanaki people were mired in conflicts between the French and the English. Between 1675 and 1763 the French and English engaged in multiple episodes of war. Attacks on Indian villages and European settlements instigated a series of retaliatory actions that often prevented Indigenous peoples from maintaining a neutral position with respect to the French and English conflicts. In the mid-1700's several attacks on Wabanaki people took place, violating earlier peace treaties. One incident in particular occurred in Wiscasset, Maine. In what has been labeled the “Wiscasset Incident” (Ghere and Morrison 2001:378), one Wabanaki man was killed and two others wounded by a group of six Englishmen anchored at Wiscasset Harbor. Three men were arrested for the crime and only one was found guilty of assault. No one was ever convicted of the murder. In their description and analysis of the Wiscasset Incident, Ghere and Morrison identify a complex, multi-factional social organization among the Wabanaki people at this time. Citing Wabanaki groups as either conciliatory or confrontational, they view the incident as a “turning point in the pursuit of both peace and justice on the Maine frontier” (Ghere and Morrison 2001:15).

A series of violent events followed the Wiscasset Incident and although the Penobscot Indians tried to maintain neutrality, Massachusetts declared war on them in 1755. Several authors offer reviews and analyses of the events leading up to the declaration (Bourque 2001; Ghere and Morrison 2001; Ghere 1994; Prins and McBride 2007). Massachusetts declared the Penobscots to be enemies and traitors to the King and Spencer Phips, acting Governor of Massachusetts issued the following proclamation:

Whereas the Tribe of Penobscot Indians have repeatedly in a perfidious manner acted contrary to the solemn submission unto his majesty long since made and frequently renewed[...]I do hereby promise that there shall be paid out of the province treasury the premiums or bounties following:

For every male Penobscot Indian above the age of 12 years, that shall be taken and brought to Boston, 50 Pounds.

For every scalp of a male Penobscot Indian above the age aforesaid, brought in as evidence of their being killed, 40 Pounds.

For every female Penobscot Indian taken and brought in as aforesaid and for every male Indian prisoner under the age of 12 years taken and brought in as aforesaid, 25 pounds.

For every scalp of such female Indian or male Indian under the age of 12 years that shall be killed and brought in as evidence of their being killed as aforesaid, 20 pounds.

Issued the 3d day of November 1755. S. Phips...God save the King. [reprinted from Hassinger 2001:83]

Proclamations similar to this one were issued during wartime, as were proclamations of peace. However, the 1755 Phips Proclamation is significant because as an artifact of violence it has re-surfaced in contemporary society and been transformed by Indigenous people into a tool for decolonization. It is unclear when and how it re-surfaced, who was responsible for its re-introduction, or why this proclamation became a contemporary decolonization tool and not others. The visibility of the Phips Proclamation is notable especially within the Penobscot Indian community—home of the descendants of the people its violence was directed against.

In recent years, Penobscots have taken ownership of the proclamation and have posted it in public places within the Penobscot community. The document hangs on the wall of the Tribal Chief's office and in the past has shared wall space with a document issued by the state of Maine proclaiming 1992 as the year of the Native American illustrating the irony of conflicting documentary sentiments. It has also been displayed in the bathroom of the Cultural and Historic Preservation Department, taking its place prominently next to some cartoons and other bathroom literature. Displays of the proclamation have not been static. Its appearance and stability within a social context are determined by individuals within the community

who decide the appropriateness of displaying such a document. It has appeared in the tribal school, the economic development office, the grants and contracts office, and the Penobscot Nation Museum. Use of the proclamation goes beyond spatial displays. Images of the proclamation are also included in tribal educational outreach efforts and Penobscot Nation curriculum packets.

The visibility and use of the Phips Proclamation is not limited to the Penobscot community. It is accessible through several online venues, including web sites for the Abbe Museum, a Maine museum dedicated to the Wabanaki people and the preservation of their material culture, the Maine Memory Network, an online museum developed by the Maine Historical Society that provides digital access to thousands of Maine documents, and the web site of the Maine Public Broadcasting Network. The Maine Memory Network and the Maine Public Broadcasting Network include the proclamation as part of online curricula. The Phips Proclamation has also been displayed in the Wabanaki Center at the University of Maine, Orono. The Wabanaki Center serves Native American students attending the University of Maine.

Most recently, the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission (MITSC)¹ used the Phips Proclamation to initiate a healing process around the inappropriate use of an Indian mascot and the associated team name of “Redskins” by a local school district. The school district is located in Wiscasset, Maine, location of the Wiscasset Incident discussed above but also the location of a colonial garrison where bounty hunters would register to hunt Wabanaki people for scalps (Seybolt 1930). Hunting Wabanaki people became very lucrative at times. By resolution in 1757, the Great and General Court of Massachusetts raised the bounty to 300 pounds in an effort to “rid the colony of the ‘Indian enemy’” (Seybolt 1930:527). At the time, this was a considerable sum. By way of example, Seybolt notes that the annual salary of a school teacher in Boston was 120 pounds. The disbursement of bounty occurred under the signature of Samuel Waldo, a brigadier general who laid claim to Penobscot land that eventually became present-day Waldo County.

Since the early 1930s the Wiscasset High School’s mascot has been the “Redskins,” a term considered derogatory by many Indigenous peoples and inappropriate for use in institutions of learning. After consultation with all five Wabanaki Chiefs in Maine, MITSC sent a letter to the RSU-12 School Board requesting that Wiscasset stop using the mascot name “Redskins” and the stereotypical caricature image of a Native American wearing a rendition of a western plains-style headdress.

¹ MITSC is an intergovernmental body comprised six tribal representatives and six representatives from the State of Maine. MITSC is charged with monitoring compliance with the Maine Implementing Act and assuring good and respectful relations between the state and the tribes.

By way of follow-up to their written request, MITSC representatives attended a RSU-12 School Board meeting and shared with them a copy of the Phips Proclamation. The purpose of the Phips Proclamation was three-fold: as an artifact; as a reminder of the inhumanity of the colonizer; and as an invitation offered by a recovered people to begin a process of healing. During the presentation, representatives explained the shared tragic history of the descendants of the Wabanaki Tribes and the descendants of the colonial families in Wiscasset. MITSC requested that RSU-12 change the Redskins mascot in order to create an academic environment where Native and non-Native children could live and learn together with respect and understanding.

Even though over 250 years has passed since the Phips Proclamation was issued, the anger engendered by the request was fresh. Many in the community disputed the connection between the Phips Proclamation and the term “redskins.” They cited revisionist history that painted a picture of Indian people who spoke of themselves as redskins all the while claiming that they have always treated “their mascot” with the utmost respect. Indigenous people were referred to as “people from away” while the people from Wiscasset claimed a status akin to indigenous.

MITSC raised the issues of racism, genocide, and oppression only through the presentation of the Phips artifact. These words were not used. Nor was an analysis of the artifact offered. Yet, Wiscasset citizens repeatedly stated they were not racist, rather the victims of a vicious form of “political correct-ism.” At one point during the discussions, the Phips Proclamation was alleged to be a fraud.

Throughout the conversation, MITSC reflected the image of a culturally aware, centered, modern, and powerful indigenous perspective. Their offering was calm yet assertive and was enhanced by the ability of Indigenous spokespeople to clearly, calmly, and strongly articulate the request and the rationale behind it. The theme of healing was consistent throughout MITSC’s presentations. This, combined with the presence of contemporary Wabanaki who lay claim to their history of survival and recovery manifested in the Phips Proclamation, shifted the balance of power. The oppressed became the initiator articulating a way forward.

After months of rancor, the RSU-12 School Board, in a split 10-9 vote, mandated a change in mascot and a prohibition of Native American imagery for all sporting teams in the RSU. In the last conversation before the final vote on the subject, State Representative Leslie Fossel testified before the RSU-12 School Board. He turned his back to the board and faced the audience stating, “I have come to tell you the truth, and history is closing in on you. You will no longer be able to continue the way you have. It is time to change.” Allies and Indigenous people successfully used the Phips Proclamation to remind others of what was done and that it should never happen again. “History is closing in,” it is time to heal.

The circumstances surrounding the mascot issue in Wiscasset created an opportunity to give visibility to the Phips Proclamation. The visibility and use of the Phips Proclamation by the indigenous and non-indigenous people of Maine warrants some analysis. The social dynamics around this artifact of violence has changed dramatically over the span of 250 years. Violence theory as presented by Fanon (1963) offers some insight into the acts of re-introduction, display, and use of the Phips Proclamation as a tool for social change. His writings serve as a useful analytical tool for understanding the role of the Phips Proclamation in the context of decolonization theory, especially given the history of the Proclamation. Fanon acknowledges the importance of history in the decolonization process. Fanon writes:

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder. But it cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentleman's agreement. Decolonization, we know, is an historical process: In other words, it can only be understood, it can only find its significance and become self coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance. [Fanon 1963:2]

Fanon presents three concepts related to decolonization that are applicable to the re-introduction of the Phips Proclamation into contemporary society. The first concept relates to a compartmentalized world in which the colonizers remain as foreigners in the eyes of the indigenous. Fanon states:

In the colonies the foreigner imposed himself using his cannons and machines. Despite the success of his pacification, in spite of his appropriation, the colonist always remains a foreigner. It is not the factories, the estates or the bank account which primarily characterize the "ruling class." The ruling species is first and foremost the outsider from elsewhere, different from the indigenous population "the others." [Fanon 1963:5]

By posting the Spencer Phips Proclamation and making it visible to others, Wabanaki people are asserting their rights to their homeland with a visual reminder to the non-indigenous that they are foreigners to this land. It effectively classifies the non-indigenous as outsiders, interlopers, and a people with severed roots. Additionally, it reaffirms Wabanaki ties to their homeland and solidifies their relationship with that land, both in their eyes and in the eyes of others.

A second applicable concept from Fanon revolves around instruments of violence. Fanon writes, “Yes, instruments are important in the field of violence since in the end everything is based on the allocation of these instruments of force” (Fanon 1963:26). However, he does not define instruments solely in terms of numbers of people or weapons, but also in the context of how they are used and the alliances of the colonized. He says “Moreover, the colonized subject is not alone in the face of the oppressor. There is of course the political and diplomatic aid of the progressive countries and their people” (Fanon 1963:27).

For Indigenous people, education can serve as an instrument of force when used in the context of alliances with progressive educators, school administrators, and faculty. Incorporating the Phips Proclamation into educational outreach efforts serves as a form of resistance against violence and the continued oppression of Indigenous people. This is occurring in partnership with allies in the educational process. Wabanaki people are not alone in these efforts as evidenced by other entities and organizations engaging the public with the Phips Proclamation.

The Wretched of the Earth includes several case studies that Fanon uses to illustrate the impact of colonization on the individual psyche. It is from this arena that we draw the third concept. Fanon writes:

Because it is a systematized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: “Who am I in reality?”
[Fanon 1963:182]

As an element of history that has shaped who Wabanaki people are today, the Phips Proclamation addresses that question by connecting people to the events and actions instrumental in shaping a contemporary worldview. The re-introduction of this artifact into contemporary society links people to their ancestors, homeland, and identity. It reinforces a sense of identity in that it validates the past and celebrates how indigenous people have endured through time regardless of the violent forces acting upon them. It serves as an element in the story of a colonized people.

Fanon has provided us with some useful tools in understanding the process of and theories behind decolonization. While interpreting the Phips Proclamation from the context of decolonization theory is useful, it is also important to recognize the importance of honoring those who were violated by the Proclamation. Although Indigenous peoples may find themselves constantly at the negotiating table with others who share their physical space, they do not share their cultural, spiritual, or social space. This is what preserves Indigenous autonomy and independence. Indigenous fights for political and economic sovereignty are real, but also real is the cultural, spiritual, and social sovereignty that they employ every day, among their membership, in their homes, and on their lands.

Understanding that, we offer an alternative interpretation of why the Phips Proclamation has achieved such visibility in contemporary Wabanaki society. In 1782, General George Washington issued an order creating the Badge of Military Merit, which served as the precursor to the Purple Heart medal. Today this medal is issued by the President of the United States to those soldiers wounded or killed as the result of an enemy or hostile act (United States:2006). Many Wabanaki people were wounded or killed in the defense of their homeland. Similar to the Purple Heart medal, the act of posting the Spencer Phips Proclamation acknowledges those ancestors whose bloodshed helped to preserve the integrity of a homeland and identity. It reflects an act of sovereignty and a testament to Wabanaki survival.

To conclude, the significance of posting the Phips Proclamation can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Its evolving role in contemporary times underscores the necessity to understand the contextual forces that shape the artifact's meaning. Its meaning for Penobscots living during the eighteenth century differs from its meaning for contemporary Penobscots and other Wabanaki people. If we contextualize the act of re-introducing the Phips Proclamation within a broader understanding of decolonization theory, the meaning of the artifact differs yet again. If we are to understand and support healing from violence we cannot ignore how human beings engage with and interact with artifacts of violence. As we have seen with the examples discussed here, human beings have the power to transform artifacts of violence for alternative purposes--purposes that are beneficial for all of humanity.

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